

Introduction to Horkheimer, ‘Sketch for a novel’

In autumn 1942, while working with T.W. Adorno on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer began to write a novel. Its lead character was the English prime minister Neville Chamberlain (1869–1940), who, in September 1938, after several meetings with Hitler and along with France’s Edouard Daladier, agreed not to oppose Germany’s demand to annex the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Horkheimer regarded Chamberlain’s willingness to appease Hitler as evidence of the complicity of the ruling classes with fascism, as well as a significant test case of what counted as a ‘reasonable’ demand in modern political life. Indeed, the concurrent work on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* insisted that fascism was an extension of bourgeois domination with its means-end rationality, even if it commonly relied more explicitly on ‘unreasonable’ brute force, rather than meditately, via exchange and the market.¹ A satirical work, the novel was to have followed Chamberlain’s afterlife and his encounter with God, who against his assumptions is a woman, but in line with his fears has democratic and socialist sympathies. Horkheimer had an overview typed up and had drafted a couple of versions of the novel’s first few pages.

Stimulus and research material for the novel came from books and newspaper articles sent to Horkheimer in California by Herbert Marcuse, who in autumn 1942 was living in New York, before moving to Washington DC. From time to time, the novel was discussed in their letters. One letter from Horkheimer to Marcuse reveals, for example, that Chamberlain was to be led into the Realm of the Souls not only by Duns Scotus, who appears in the following translated extract, but also by the poet Dante and the statesmen Michel de l’Hôpital and Klemens von Metternich. In a letter to Horkheimer on 8 November 1942, Marcuse observed that the use of Metternich ‘would give you a good opportunity to show your theory on the true significance of “reactionary” and “popular” movements. A closer study of his personality and work would furthermore provide excellent material for our analysis of enlightenment, romanticism and domination.’²

Horkheimer abandoned the novel for unknown reasons. The last mention of it is in a letter from Horkheimer to Marcuse on 4 December 1942: ‘Thank you for the excerpts. Please don’t use too much time for this problem. I have not yet started since I used all time for the main thing.’³ He also assured Marcuse in this letter that he should accept a position in the US intelligence bureau of the Office of War Information in Washington DC, arguing that it would not impede his future collaboration with the Institute for Social Research, but might indeed be a means of furthering their shared interests, such as their critical attention to German chauvinism.

The sketch for a novel is included in Volume 12 of Horkheimer’s *Collected Works*, appearing in a very short section titled ‘Poetic Efforts’, in which the only other piece is a two-page skit from 1946, ‘Declaration of Independence by Dogs’. It is translated here with the permission of the German publisher, Fischer.

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Notes

1. Adorno and Horkheimer briefly contrast Hitler’s and Chamberlain’s versions of reason in relation to exchange in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2002, p. 174.
2. Cited in the editorial prefatory note, Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume 12: *Nachgelassene Schriften, 1931–1949*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1985.
3. Ibid.

Sketch for a novel on Neville Chamberlain (1942)

Max Horkheimer

[Opening of the Novel]

In the hour after his death Neville Chamberlain's thoughts did not immediately turn to politics. During his final days, in the intervals when the spasms had abated, he had been concerned with private matters. His affairs all had to be properly dealt with. He did not wish to leave anything out of order. The idea that others might have to sort out what he had neglected to despatch, to clear up anything that he had left undone, had been intolerable to him, and had merely intensified his final sufferings. It was only in the moment of death that this anxiety was dispelled. And a sense of relief came over him, like he had used to feel at the weekends, though never as powerfully as now. He was content. His punctilious execution of his responsibilities was not in question. He had always risen punctually in the morning, had appeared in the office after his walk just as the clock struck, in London, as in Birmingham. His life was dedicated to substantial interests rather than personal whims. The maintenance and extension of property which was honestly acquired, and the welfare of his family, his party, his country, these were the things which had filled his days. He had carefully discharged the tasks entrusted to him, had calmly made the bold decisions that were required and followed them through without allowing himself to be distracted by the objections of others. Now all this lay behind him. He was finally released from responsibility.

During this last year of his life he had been especially hard on himself. His illness was consuming him, and he was unwilling to give in. Then the severe pains began. When he stepped down from the Council he already knew the end was near, and only agreed to the hopeless medical operation with considerable reluctance. When indeed this proved unsuccessful he had not complained, and yet these final weeks had been the hardest: it turned out that dying demanded a greater expenditure of energy than life itself. Now

he had endured this trial too. All things considered, he had shown himself no less worthy than his father. The disadvantages in birth and gifts that he felt with regard to Austen,* these he had transformed, with great energy and persistence, into advantages. He was an outstanding administrator. The doubt which beset his early years, and which had come to motivate his actions, the doubt as to whether he was marked for greatness as the other Chamberlain men had been, this had almost vanished. His life lay clearly and transparently before him. It was a life which was neither disfigured by vice, in contrast to that of his successor, nor tainted by open or hidden scandal. He bore the evident seal of success: the family had furnished the country with a prime minister. All the indications suggested that he could now rest content. The final word, of course, would lie with the Lord God himself.

He must now prepare himself to meet the Lord. At this thought he was overcome with a sense of humility before the might before which no further appeal is possible. God has no need of human beings, and His knowledge exceeds all earthly wisdom. Yet to render an account of himself before the majesty of God was now the sole remaining task. A certain sense of unease came over him at this moment. However confident he felt in relation to his fellow human beings about the decisions he had made, Chamberlain could not shake off a feeling of disquiet as to how these decisions might appear in the sight of the Almighty. It is true that he had learned, not without some astonishment, that his own judgement was more reliable than that of those around him. The harsh years of apprenticeship as a pioneer, the commercial training and experience which he had acquired with unrelenting ambition, had brought him that sure and steady perspective which others generally lacked. His solid understanding of things sprang from the violence he exacted upon himself. The price he paid for

* Austen Chamberlain (1863–1937) was Neville's half-brother. He served as Chancellor of the Exchequer (1903–05 and 1919–21) and Foreign Secretary (1924–29) [Ed.].

this was a denial of immediate gratification. And he exchanged this for a ready familiarity with relevant details, an enthusiasm for continuous reform and improvement, and an ability for concentrated and reliable intellectual application. He understood what a man could achieve, that his character and capacities sprang from that self-control which he had learned to exercise from early on. They constituted the capital interest, the compound interest, that he allowed to work and grow, and were not things to be touched or enjoyed directly. The self-imposed capacity to wait was the secret of capital, just as it was the secret of human civilization. Chamberlain found it particularly difficult to tolerate thoughts that were not fully formed, however eloquently expressed, for they tended to conceal an inability to pursue interests in a consistent manner under a cloak of nebulous ideas, and he was impatient with shortcomings of every kind. But his own confidence bore the marks of the violence which he had had to perpetrate on himself in order to achieve it. At one with the tenacious businessman, he was also still the child that seeks the admiring gaze of his father for whom indeed all achievements are accomplished.

[Overview of the further development of the narrative] Rough sketch of the action

After he has died Mr Neville Chamberlain, the Lord Chancellor of the British peace policy, learns the secret meaning of world history in general and the significance of the political events in which he himself played a crucial part. Immediately after the hour of his death he has disconcerting premonitions of what is to come. Of course, he has no doubt that he is about to enter Paradise, for unlike his old foe and fellow conservative Churchill he has led an entirely blameless private life. Nor has he neglected to fulfil his religious duties. But he is anxious about possible accusations of the Lord God in regard to his political choices and decisions. He has a creeping fear that God might entertain certain democratic or even socialist sympathies. Even when he was alive, he had already occasionally been visited by this suspicion, but had always managed to suppress it before. Now he feels oppressed by his own disturbing moods.

The action describes his journey as he moves from the mentality of an English conservative of the ruling faction and advances towards a state of full enlightenment. The individual stages of the journey consist in dialogues with prominent personalities from earlier history, and in the experiences vouchsafed him during these particular months when the

divine Governance of the World is exposed to some turbulent and indeed catastrophic moments.

The central episode is the process by which Chamberlain is made ready to gaze upon the Highest Being, a task which the Governance of the World has entrusted to Duns Scotus, the *doctor mirabilis*.

Topography

The most striking thing to begin with is the environment in which Chamberlain finds himself. He was expecting to be transported through a radiant, cerulean and boundless aether, and indeed to be guided and accompanied by angels, which he rather imagined on the model of London traffic policemen. But instead he finds himself in a very elegant and luxuriously appointed room with attractive artificial light and an inviting feather bed. The first person he meets is a charming maid who has been expressly provided to minister to him. She passes him a menu, of the kind he half-consciously imagined with a shudder were typical of the best Paris restaurants. She also informs him that the most outstanding cooks of all times and cultures were all at hand to prepare whatever meals were required. She also enquires about any other requests he might have. And he discovers, with increasing astonishment, that he not only has a strong desire to try the food, but also, *horribile dictu*, would love to taste the champagne. Indeed he feels in the best of form in every respect. He looks in the mirror and sees that his appearance has not changed at all since the last year of his life, but the young lady assures him that it will certainly change once he is admitted into the presence of the Highest Being. From time to time, about every ten minutes or so, an almost intoxicating perfume wafts through all the rooms, and the distant sound of the most remarkable music also reaches his ears. He strolls through wonderful artificial gardens and makes some interesting acquaintances along the way. And he also realizes, to his considerable consternation, that the Paradise where in fact he finds himself lies at the centre of the earth, where he had confusedly imagined Hell itself to be. Cicero explains to him with a smile that Hell corresponds exactly to what human beings have conceived as Heaven. That the damned souls who had rejected God are condemned to sing perpetual hymns of praise to the larger than life-sized Devil with the mighty beard, who is always wrathful and thinks of nothing but vengeance. That for all eternity they are forced to fly around in the void without any nourishment or erotic satisfaction, without ever being able to stop and alight on firm ground. That

the air is filled with the terrible sounds of monstrous trumpet blasts, which is exceeded now and then solely by the voice that cries out and overpowers all else. That the voice hurls out reproaches and vengeful oaths with never-ending malice, declaring that the souls shall be punished, tortured and humiliated even to the hundredth, thousandth, millionth and billionth degree. That in Paradise, on the other hand, there prevails a pleasant atmosphere, everything is measured and well-proportioned, where we can turn off the lights and sleep – in contrast to Hell, where we must constantly be fresh and cheerful.

This topography makes something else clear as well: the values that prevail in Paradise are precisely the ones that were condemned in the earthly realm, especially in the puritanical countries: doing nothing, strutting about, eating and drinking well, looking at things with curiosity, taking one's good time – here there are no clocks. The concept of efficiency is conspicuously absent; efficiency exists only in Hell, where one has to shout and scream and blow the trumpet as noisily as possible. And when Chamberlain remarks that no civilization could be built on the basis of the qualities that are cultivated here, he receives the reply: the question regarding the value of civilization is a philosophical one and the decision in this regard remains open. No decisions whatsoever are taken in Paradise, unless they are taken by the Highest Being, and thereby hangs a tale.

The governance of the world

The Governance of the World consists of a 'Board' of important personalities from history. It is made up of blessed statesmen, political leaders, business figures, generals, and a very small number of artists. The artists, Chamberlain learns, can hardly tear themselves from gazing on the Highest Being. The Governance of the World submits various proposals to the Highest Being, and the sole purpose of these proposals is to direct history in a way that allows human beings to retain their faith in the Highest Being. This is an exceedingly difficult task, for human beings have revealed a certain tendency to scepticism and criticism from time immemorial. It is an enormous achievement that the Governance of the World has succeeded at all in fulfilling its task for so many thousands of years.

The means employed to this end are many and various. The Governance of the World represents an immense treasure trove of wisdom. Until the beginning of our own era it still made use of miracles for example. Seas were parted, dead trees were

brought back to life, the dead were roused again. But now this has all been abandoned, for it has become clear that such violations of the established order of things only inspire novel ambitious hopes, and also confuse human beings in the process. Consequently it has now become standard practice to accomplish all the purposes of the Governance of the World without recourse to the violation of the laws of nature. Of course, the human faith in the eternal character of natural laws, foolish though it basically is, in the long run serves religion far better than miracles ever did. From time to time the question of miracles is occasionally raised once more, but every time this happens, as latterly in the case of Therese von Konnersreuth, it is always decided in favour of natural laws in the end.

The course of world history is carefully planned. Human beings come into the world with the gifts which they have to possess in order to accomplish the events that have been ordained. One cannot of course deprive them of the freedom that belongs to their nature, but there is plenty one can do to ensure that this freedom works out in the intended sense. Through all sorts of material complications one can divert the inventions and discoveries that human beings make on the basis of their freedom in specific directions, one can place natural obstacles in their path, one can restrict their all too considerable and dangerous amount of leisure, and so on and so forth.

It is all part of the established routine that from time to time there appears a great world conqueror who enjoys enormous military successes, seizes countries, humbles nations, and alters all the prevailing conditions. And when his power finally crumbles, this only serves in an exemplary way to buttress human faith in the greatness of the Highest Being. After Napoleon Bonaparte, it is now Hitler whom the Governance of the World has chosen in this regard. But it is not altogether easy to understand why there should be such tremendous disquiet among all the members of the highest Board, and indeed among the lesser functionaries as well, and Chamberlain only learns the reason for this after making laborious enquiries that are not always willingly answered.

Permission refused

Machiavelli finally says that he is ready to explain the situation. First of all, he sets Chamberlain's mind at rest with regard to his own role in these affairs. Hitler had long since been planned. Even if Chamberlain had never harboured the illusion that Hitler could have become a good partner for British power, this

would certainly not have checked his quest for world conquest. For the matter was already decided. One would simply have made the world ready for fascism, albeit for different reasons. Chamberlain thus felt as though a mighty weight had been lifted from him, yet this was precisely why he found it so hard to understand the disquiet that had arisen. Machiavelli now explains the real reason for this. The Governance of the World proposes the long-term plans for history and then seeks the agreement of the Highest Being before going ahead. Agreement is duly given for Hitler's conquest of the world, and for his eventual fall. But this general permission is not sufficient. For before every important event a specific agreement is also required. According to the original plan the fall of Hitler had been set for November 1941, and on this occasion the Highest Being had withheld the required agreement. Ever since then the Governance of the World had sought in vain, through its most skilful and accomplished representatives, to obtain permission for Hitler's final defeat. But still no answer had been received.

The predicament of the Governance of the World is not an enviable one. According to the laws of nature the Germans should long since have been defeated. For almost five years now they had suffered under the most serious shortages and deprivations with regard to all the necessities of life. They are at war with the most powerful states in the world. Their weapons are beginning to look obsolete in comparison with those of their enemies. And in certain areas these enemies enjoy an obvious superiority. According to the laws of nature the superior power of the Allies should already have decided the situation. But the

Governance of the World is well aware that even an insignificant but clear defeat of Hitler on any one of the battlefields could, on natural expectations, bring about a revolution in Germany. In order to preserve appearances, therefore, the Governance of the World must also avoid this minor defeat.

The inconspicuous means which it deploys to this end is to dazzle the Allied generals and political leaders. Thus when some British general, with his modern tanks and with his better nourished and more numerous troops, starts to close in on an endangered German army, he is simply dazzled by the Governance of the World. If some heavily fortified position looks as though it could long withstand the attacks upon it, its commanders are similarly dazzled, so that they capitulate without further resistance. Those who requisition the weapons for the Allies are dazzled too, so that the finest technology available to them is not actually exploited. But for all this the situation becomes more and more difficult. Even if it is relatively easy to ensnare Churchill with the Court faction, the Governance of the World has a particularly difficult task with Stalin. As he recounts all this Machiavelli finds himself close to tears.

The preparation

Sunk in his own thoughts Chamberlain awaits the arrival of Duns Scotus, who is to prepare him for the sight of the Highest Being. Chamberlain is tense with expectation in this regard. The explanations which Machiavelli has provided have in fact vouchsafed him significant insights not only into the immediate present but also into history as a whole. He is now in a position to understand many historical episodes,



which had formerly appeared to him as incomprehensible violations of the logical course of history, on analogy with the current situation. It is a question of the tensions between the Governance of the World, which represents the logical course of things, and the Highest Being, who obviously represents the incalculable dimension of things. But Chamberlain lacks the key to the whole problem. The illumination which Duns Scotus then imparts to him in the course of a highly erudite discussion effectively disabuses him of his own entire philosophy. When Duns Scotus departs, Chamberlain is beside himself and he tells the young lady who comes in to serve him that he would rather go to Hell than stay in Paradise.

The Highest Being is a woman. The notion that it must be a man is the product of the wisdom of the Governance of the World from about 5,000 years ago. It was already obvious at the time that in the course of further development people would no longer be willing to show due reverence to a woman. So it was decided to persuade people that God was really a mighty Lord of the World. The idea was modelled on that of the Devil. With the more ancient and more experienced peoples such as the Indians and the Chinese it was difficult to achieve much in this regard. Thus the choice fell upon the Jews, a people who suffered terribly beneath the rod of Egyptian oppression and were almost bereft of understanding, who had almost lost their original faith in the Queen of Heaven. From here this idea was then disseminated throughout Europe in the somewhat milder form of Christianity. The merit for this lies principally with Moses, Muhammed, Luther and Calvin. In Europe, too, the Governance of the World required extremely violent means to hammer home to people the absurd idea that the world, though material in nature, was not born of a woman, but was conjured forth by a man through a mere command.

This idea, which turns truth upon its head, also introduced the notions of the merits of charity, the blessings of labour, the majesty of dominion, and similar equally deluded but also extremely useful categories.

Now that Chamberlain has been duly instructed, the pretty young maid can only confirm his suspicion that the sight of the Highest Being will actually mean admission into the never-ending orgies which take place at the very heart of Paradise. The Highest Being would be revealed as an eternally youthful Woman, who was originally venerated by the Greeks as Aphrodite. The maid smiles at Chamberlain's expressions of despair and tells him that after preparation many

others have also reacted in a similar way, but that there has never yet been a single soul who, on actually enjoying the sight of the Highest Being, has reaffirmed the wish to leave Paradise. Only now does Chamberlain notice that the maid is speaking French. When the despairing Chamberlain allows himself to engage in further conversation he finds the key to many other lesser events of current history which he had never fully understood, such as the capture and occupation of Paris. The conquest of France had been anticipated in the plan, and had been authorized by the Highest Being. As a particularly effective part of the Hitler episode it had been envisaged that Paris, which no longer belonged in this day and age anyway, would be bombarded and finally taken in street fighting. But at the last moment the Highest Being had withheld permission. The reason was that she was rather interested in the work of the Parisian couturiers for the upcoming season, and would certainly not permit this to be interrupted in any way. The whole of the French General Staff thus specifically had to be dazzled, so that they would abandon their decision to defend Paris and declare it an open city instead.

Further moments of enlightenment

In the next few days before final admission into the presence of the Highest Being, the knowledge which Chamberlain has acquired regarding the ultimate questions is extended to form a comprehensive picture of things, even down to the last details. Above all, he comes to realize that among all theological systems of thought Puritanism is the least adequate. Catholicism approaches much more closely to the truth than this. Indeed the Highest Being had originally expressed a serious interest in Catholicism. The Highest Being recognized herself in the figure of Mary, which sprang from a natural human sense for the pre-eminent significance of the Feminine. It was only through the supreme diplomatic skill of certain members of the Governance of the World that permission was granted for this figure to receive the stigma of Immaculate Conception. But the Highest Being had at least insisted on the indispensability of conception. In the end, however, the Governance of the World had even managed to establish that the mother of Mary had conceived her daughter immaculately as well, something that was nonetheless only conceded, as the history of theology shows, after long and complex considerations. Chamberlain reluctantly becomes a witness to a discussion between two very prominent members of the Governance of the World. One of these (Aquinas, for example) has just

returned from one of many fruitless embassies with the Highest Being and now relieves his frustration by lamenting the situation. ‘It’s the same story every time, it is becoming very tedious’, as he says. ‘Do you remember all the trouble we had with Alexander and King Frederick II. As soon as some mighty character really starts to sense his own power and becomes proud of it, the Highest Being herself falls for him. This time with all our chicanery we have hit upon a particularly unattractive and repulsive rogue. We have made him into a vegetarian, a misogynist, a teetotaller – she still became infatuated with him. On the excellent advice of our friend Lycurgus we caused him to reject the pardons of condemned women and each time to lay out the case specifically – but all to no effect.’ It is just too horrible, but she enjoys not only Eternal Youth but Eternal Puberty as well. The other partner to the discussion, a particularly influential member of the Governance of the World replies: ‘You can talk, my friend! You know that over the last few years I have been involved in promoting the industrialization of Russia. It took all my effort to prevent her falling for Stalin. Just imagine the consequences!’

Chamberlain realizes that even the petty inexplicable aspects of everyday political life find a simple explanation here in Paradise. Thus recently he had been reflecting on the affair of the German saboteurs who had been taken by submarine to land on American soil. In every other country of the world they would have been shot there and then in accordance with martial law. The incomprehensible process by which this inevitable act was legally delayed and taken all the way to the Supreme Court was simply due to the fact that the Highest Being was particularly interested in such young, bold and strong individuals. Chamberlain’s picture of the world is becoming more and more accurate.

The world crisis

The consternation and confusion over the fact that the divine permission had been withheld, and over the difficulties created as a result, actually betrayed a much deeper anxiety. When it was claimed above that the idea of the masculine God sprang from the wisdom of the Governance of the World, this is not entirely correct. For in truth at that time there was as yet no Governance of the World, which on the contrary was only formed in the wake of that decision. Before that time human beings did not indeed have to be bound with malice and cunning to an intrinsically deluded faith. The whole concept of

governance belongs to our current masculine period of the world. But the idea derived from Hercules, the *ami titré* of the Highest Being at the time. In the crisis which was threatening the survival of the human race, which was about to perish as a species on account of its higher capacity for enjoyment, Hercules discovered the required solution. With a smile the Highest Being had agreed. But the consequences were extremely complicated. It proved necessary to turn more and more to especially intelligent souls for advice, and finally to form a Board and entrust it with the task of directing the course of history. The Board appointed further offices and subsidiary sections, along with a huge administrative apparatus, like that which currently exists in the capital cities of the warring states. But now humanity once again finds itself in a similar crisis, and the Governance of the World does not actually know what to advise or how to resolve the problem in a truly fundamental way. The Governance of the World cannot just suspend its role. Employing the petty means of the world conqueror no longer suffices, so much is clear. The logic of the events which one has oneself produced, even after the fall of Hitler, will in all likelihood only force one to maintain fascism throughout the world in one form or another. The danger that human beings will completely liberate themselves from faith in and subjection to domination is too great. The ideas of freedom can now only be repressed by the most fearful means. The Governance of the World feels that the reluctance of the Highest Being to ratify its decisions basically betrays a reluctance with regard to all these measures. The Highest Being has had enough with this period of the world and would basically be prepared to see the Governance of the World itself abolished. The Highest Being takes no particular pleasure in the fact that human beings constantly lift their eyes towards it, since it actually exists in the centre of the earth. The essence of the Highest Being is not power, even if it can hardly resist realized power. It would prefer to return to the naive condition of the very beginning of things, and release human beings themselves.

The end of the narrative looks out upon the prospect of realized liberation, the process in which human beings themselves shake off all governance of this kind. The more he becomes aware of this, the more Chamberlain’s despair intensifies, until it finally proves unbearable. At this very moment the gate opens through which he passes to look upon the Highest Being.

Translated by Nicholas Walker